

## The Only One

The spring air was sharp, pungent even, and heavy with the scent of orange blossoms and freshly-turned earth. Sylvia took a deep inhale, felt the cool of the breeze stir the wisps of hair at her face. She was an old woman now, and these small things were wonders to her. Sometimes it was the scent of something, a memory that held no weight in images, but only in sensation. Emotions would rise immediately to the surface, sometimes overtaking her entire body, and she might burst into tears at the smell of the orange trees. Sometimes it might be the way the sunlight bounced like gold between the clouds in the early morning. And sometimes it was the sight of her grandson, whose image was that from her own childhood, his shaggy dark hair and luminous eyes nearly identical to those in the old photo which was tucked away among ancient spools of thread and handmade pincushions in her sewing box.

Just then her daughter's car pulled up, and the memories receded. Her grandson Isaac had unbuckled his seatbelt and bounded out of the car just as it had come to a stop in her driveway. Her daughter smiled and waved, mouthing "thank you" as she whipped the car into reverse and sped off.

"Late to class again, Gemma?" she murmured under her breath.

"Nona!" Isaac cried, bounding toward her, black curls bouncing. He had a broken purple crayon in one fist, and a stone from the driveway in the other.

"Have you found treasures for Nona today?" she cooed, grabbing him just as he approached and swinging him up as high as her aging bones would allow her.

He laughed then, that sweet bird-like laughter of small children, music to her ears now that her own child was grown and the house was empty more often than not.

They walked lazily inside to her kitchen, stopping for a moment to savor the peppermint-striped roses blooming by the side door. The roses were nearly hidden by the purple haze of wisteria that drooped and dropped from the trellis overhanging the door.

“What can we do fun, Nona?” the little boy asked, just as a stainless steel colander full of strawberries sitting by the sink caught his eye.

“Strawberries!” he cried, “Nona, can I have strawberries?”

Nona shook her head sadly.

“They’ve gone bad, Love. See?” and she held up a graying berry spotted with mold.

Little Isaac was not easily discouraged.

“I’ll look, Nona,” he insisted, and climbed up onto the stepstool that Nona kept at the sink just for him, a little yellow wooden step that made him just tall enough to reach. Before Nona could stop him, he dumped the strainer of berries into the sink and then peered into the jumbled pile of fruit. After a moment, he plucked one berry from the others, held it up to Nona triumphantly.

“Look, Nona, one good berry!”

And in fact, it was: one spotless bright red berry.

The old woman’s eyes welled up, whether from grief or gratitude, who could know. Her mind drifted, that much was obvious. She reflected on the lean years after the war, when no one even saw fresh strawberries at the market, let alone had the money to buy them. Here in California, the open-air markets were like a wonderland, and she was Alice herself, gone down the rabbit hole into a beautiful circus of colors and smells, all crisp and savory and soft and sweet at once, at every stall.

Sylvia’s mind wandered often, in a way that kept as a constant reminder those sights and sounds and smells that were most impressed upon her throughout the years. She generally kept a tight vigil over her childhood memories; they were what seemed like several lifetimes’ worth of the best and the worst possible moments in the life of one child. She tried to tuck a memory away, quickly and deftly, as comes with practice, and turned her attention back to her grandson’s previous exclamation.

*“Look, Nona, one good berry!”*

But the memories kept coming now, against her will, brief words and parsed-together images of some other timeworn place, and so much wanting. She never thought how bittersweet this would taste: sixty-seven years of freedom and still her mind drew her back again and again to the place where boots were polished by the spit of a Jew, where people walked a precarious line in the balance between life and death.

She remembered the rows of razor-toothed wire fences that surrounded the camp, and how she could crouch down low beside the fence and hear the hum of the electricity, careful never to let even the hem of her camp-issued dress touch the live wires. She had watched men throw themselves onto the fences deliberately, so awful was their existence. But never the women. The women endured, perhaps for the sake of their children, or perhaps the female sex is simply engineered for survival. Whatever the reason, it was the men who became frantic, who panicked when they first arrived and threw themselves like lemmings against the fences that burned like lightning, until the guards would put them out of their misery; the guards always waited too long, for their own amusement, obviously enjoying watching the new prisoners suffer in their raw animalistic terror.

She remembered the trains, too, like one-eyed dragons puffing through the night air, bringing cars crammed with people: babies who were wrested from their mothers' arms, old men who were knocked down in the shuffle; and even strong grown men who looked like frightened cattle as they tried to keep their families from being torn apart. She had come on a train such as that, to the work camp. And she remembered – though she tried not to – the smell of the furnace, and the ash that fluttered down like a gentle snow.

She began to weep, her eyes clouded over with a kind of pain that a four-year-old could not know. Isaac climbed up beside her where she sat at the table in the breakfast nook.

“Don’t cry, Nona, you can have the good one.”

He held out his tiny hand to Nona, and the sweet red prize lay in his palm. The one good berry. She laughed then and grabbed him to her chest, ruffling his hair and planting a jubilant kiss on the top of his head.

“Come with me. We’ll go to the market and buy some more berries, the best in all the land! Come, you can be my helper!”

Sylvia nearly sprang from her seat, swiping the last of her tears away from her cheeks with the back of her hand. Isaac ran ahead of her, always having to be first, and dashed out the kitchen door, leaving the screen door slapping. She heard the skid of gravel and then a wail from Isaac, and hurried outside, her heart rat-a-tat-tatting, half-praying to every god she knew of in the five seconds it took her to get out the door. And he was fine. He had tripped, gone skidding into the stones. His face showed surprise; the tears were ones of anger, as he pointed to his knees and began wailing again. His pants were split at both knees, his skinned-up kneecaps peeking through the holes in the fabric.

“You’re okay, sweetheart. Come back inside and Nona will fix your pants, but you mustn’t run everywhere you go! It’s okay to slow down sometimes,” she chided.

“Just let me get my sewing box,” she said, walking briskly to the living room to retrieve the box, its once-tight basket-weave now starting to fall apart from age. It sat at the top of the high cherry bookshelves which were filled with books of plays and poems and essays, some in English, some in German, some of them older than Sylvia herself. She stood on the tips of her toes to reach the sewing basket, two fingers under the front edge of it, and it tumbled down, spilling its contents onto the carpet. Pincushions, thread, scissors, thimbles, needle-threaders, and even a loose needle or three. Stifling the profanity that threatened to roll off of her tongue, she bent to pick up each thing. Isaac had heard the noise and came to help. He reached for an aged photograph just as his grandmother did, their hands brushing each other’s as Sylvia quickly grabbed the curled snapshot.

“Who was that, Nona?” the boy asked, ever-curious.

“It’s no one, dear. Just an old picture of someone I used to know.”

And she tucked the photo back into the sewing box with the other things that had fallen.

Isaac picked up the last thimble and put it back in its rightful place, lingering for a moment, as if he wanted to say something. Sylvia carried on with her original task, picking out a spool

of navy blue thread to match Isaac's pants; a needle, a thimble, a pair of silver scissors with beautiful swirled art nouveau handles.

"Pants off, dear. I can't stitch them if you're sitting in them."

Isaac took a moment to wriggle out of his pants, and Sylvia had them expertly repaired in what seemed like just a few lightning-fast passes of needle and thread. She was proud of her sewing. Proud that she had had a mother who had taught her those things necessary to run a proper household. She could iron a man's dress-shirt crisply without even a touch of starch. Table linens would not have a single wrinkle in them. And she could cook! She did not keep kosher anymore, not since her husband had died at the age of forty-three. She stopped going to temple after that, even stopped praying. Harold was the last thing that any god was going to take from her. She was a firm non-believer now, refusing to accept that any deity could have anything to do with so much grief.

"Nona, I want to know about the picture," Isaac interrupted her thoughts with his childish persistence.

"Why?" she asked, a little defensively.

Isaac simply shrugged, in the way that four-year-olds are wont to do.

Sylvia let her head drop to her chest, let out a sigh, and pulled the picture back out from its hiding place. She held it in her hands for a moment, noting for later that she needed to trim her nails, and handed the photograph gingerly to Isaac. He held it as though it were a sacred thing, for indeed it was, to Sylvia. She watched him as he gazed at the image, and she marveled at the uncanny likeness of the boy sitting across from her in his Spongebob underpants, and the boy in the photo. But the boy in the photo was from another time and another place.

"Long ago and far away," Sylvia began, "that little boy was my brother."

"Did he die, Nona?" Isaac asked with complete innocence.

She nodded her head and tears threatened to spill over again.

"Yes, Isaac, yes, he did. But it was a very, very long time ago."

"Is he in the place where they bury dead people?" Isaac asked, again with a naiveté that belied his absolute trust in the world and its processes.

“No, sweetie, he’s not,” Nona answered, “but it’s okay,” she said, more to herself than to Isaac, who seemed undisturbed by talk of death and burial.

“Then where is he?” Isaac asked, in a way that was almost pleading.

The tears came unbidden now as Sylvia’s face crumpled and her shoulders drooped in heaving sobs.

“I ... don’t ... know,” she blurted out between sobs; and now Isaac appeared to be alarmed. Luckily his mother pulled into the driveway just then. The crunch of her tires on the gravel snapped Sylvia out of her crying spell. She dabbed a tissue at her tears, straightened her hair and her blouse, and opened the door for her daughter.

“Hello, Momma.”

A kiss on each cheek.

“Was he good?” asked Gemma.

“Of course, of course. Will you stay for dinner?”

“I can’t, Mom, I’ve got a ton of schoolwork. Isaac, why are your pants off?”

Isaac laughed and ran a circle around the living room.

“Put your pants back on, child,” Nona scolded, explaining Isaac’s earlier accident to his mother.

It was then that Gemma noticed the photo still lying on the kitchen table.

“I had no idea you still had this,” she said, incredulous.

“Uncle David, right?” she asked, picking up the photograph with genuine awe.

Sylvia nodded. Her eyes felt swollen and sore from crying, but Gemma appeared not to notice. Gemma had been just a little older than Isaac when she had first discovered the picture and had been told the story, a brief and unsatisfying story though it was.

David had been taken, along with their father, into a separate camp, and Sylvia and her mother never saw either of them again. The loss of her father, but especially her brother, still tore Sylvia to pieces; her chest felt as if there were a great bird trapped inside of it, beating and fluttering its wings against her chest wall, scraping with its talons to escape. David had only been six years old. To the SS, he would have been just another unnecessary mouth to feed and house. Sylvia let out a deep breath and gently took the photo back from

Gemma without saying a word. She tucked it back into the sewing box, tucking away with it the emotions that it brought with it like spring torrents.

Gemma wrangled Isaac into his mended pants and into his car seat, and Sylvia was finally alone again. She went to replace the sewing box, careful not spill it this time, but stopped as she felt a shiver run through her that was both hot and cold at the same time. Pulling the box back down, she dug out the photograph and looked at it once more, as if she had not seen it every single day for decades. She began her evening ritual then. She propped the vintage photo next to the silver-framed professional head-shot of her late husband. A smaller frame held an antique portrait of her mother and father, her mother glowing, even in sepia tone, in her white lace wedding gown and veil, her dark hair down long around her shoulders. Sylvia picked up each photo and kissed it. First her parents. Then Harold. Then little David. She lit three candles and let her breathing deepen, let her mind float away as she stared into the flames that flickered and bounced with her every exhale. She did not know anymore how to carry on with so much grief and so much longing for those who were gone. She had performed this ritual with the photos and the candles every night for thirty years. If it brought any relief, it was only temporary, and the next morning would begin again with nostalgia as her day-long, bittersweet companion.

She snuffed out each candle, careful not to let the hot wax splatter on the precious photographs, and tucked the one of Davy back into the sewing kit. A tip-toe reach to the top of the bookshelf. A few steps' walk to the kitchen, where she grabbed an amber plastic bottle of prescription pills and swallowed one of the green and yellow capsules. Her doctor said that she was depressed, and she had been taking a capsule each day faithfully for close to a year now. She doubted their worth, but did as the good doctor bid.

Her nightly tasks complete, she got herself ready for bed. Nightgown. Slippers. Brush the teeth. Brush the hair, one hundred strokes, no fewer. She knew she wouldn't sleep until dawn was near, just like every other night. She also knew that her wakeful night would be replete with flashbacks, each one dawning on her like a slow and sleepy waking dream, until it became so horrible that it was no longer the stuff of dreams, but of nightmares. She would lie in bed until they passed, knowing that they always did, but wondering if some night they

might not stop, if her whole life might be consumed by these hell-born visions. Sylvia considered the bottle of pills in the kitchen; there were enough left to kill an elderly woman, she supposed. She got out of bed and padded down the hallway to the kitchen, which was lit only by a single small bulb over the stove. Glancing once more at the medicine bottle, she grabbed a pad of paper and hastily scrawled a note: "I could no longer bear being the only one," she wrote, and was then immediately embarrassed by how melodramatic it sounded. She crumpled the paper into a ball and tossed it in the trash bin along with the vial of pills; she went instead to the bookshelves in the living room and got the sewing basket down yet again. Sitting it on the coffee table near an antique carved-wood rocking chair, she sat down and waited for a memory to pass. She saw, on the film reel in her mind, little Davy and herself ice-skating for the first time. How frightened she had been that they would fall through the ice! From there, the film footage in her head shot to the crowded platform at a train station. Night-time blackness. Sooty coal-smoke hanging heavy in the air. Big wet snowflakes falling softly. Men shouting in thick German; women wailing in Yiddish. The terror on Davy's face as his hand slipped from her grasp. Sylvia shook her head vigorously, as if trying to shake away the chaotic shadows that were cluttering her mind.

It was Gemma who found Sylvia the next morning, curled up fast asleep even in the hardness of the rocking chair, the photo of David clutched in her hand. Gemma gently placed a hand on her mother's shoulder, not wanting to startle her. She jumped anyway, gasped at the sight of Gemma and at the realization that she had slept far too late.

"Isaac and I got you something, Momma. I think it's the right size," Gemma said, handing her mother a small rectangular package wrapped in brown paper.

Sylvia gingerly opened the package and discovered a beautiful antiqued-brass photo frame which, she found, was precisely the right size for the snapshot of her little brother. She slid the back off and placed the photo inside, marveling aloud at how handsome Davy looked in the new frame.

"Where's Isaac?" Sylvia asked, realizing that the room was missing the whirling dervish that was her grandson.



Gemma gestured toward the door, and it was then that Sylvia heard the peal of Isaac's laughter, like a bell to announce that the day had begun. Sylvia went outside to find him, the newly-framed photo still clutched tightly in her hand, and smiled as she caught a whiff of the orange trees on the morning breeze.